

The 4 Key Factors That Drive Successful Executives

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Executives of the caliber of Jack Welch or Warren Buffet are rare. But the repertoire of these superstars and of all exceptional managers and executives contains four essential ingredients of decision-making. Those ingredients make the difference between exceptional careers and ordinary careers.

These ingredients are more fundamental and more profound than even Covey's Seven Habits of highly effective executives. The simple reason is that executive habits are rooted in and emerge from the four key factors underlying their decision-making process. The ingredients that drive effective decisions are:

1. They know exactly the career and business situation they are in without illusions.
2. They know the role they have to play and how to play it very effectively.
3. They formulate clear and ambitious goals.
4. They create cost-effective options for their decision-making.

These items seem simple but are extraordinarily difficult to achieve. These four ingredients are the basic framework used by exceptionally effective, clear thinking executives. Clear thinkers are encumbered neither by excesses of emotion nor deficits of reason or knowledge. The trademark of clear thinking is objectivity, a one-to-one connection between their *ideas* of what is real and what *is actually* real.

Many executives distort their decision making with consistent errors in their rationales that hurt their results. As Mark Twain noted, "*You can't depend on your eyes when your imagination is out of focus.*" In a sense, clear thinking is the business world's version of scientific clarity of thought. From clear thinking emerges powerfully effective habits and strong results for these executives and their organizations.

Self-unawareness

Many executives stumble over one or more of these four factors because of a simple phenomenon: an executive ego resembles an individual's eyeballs. An eye can see reality, but an eye cannot see itself – unless there is someone to act like a mirror. In other words, to think clearly we need accurate feedback, and without such feedback we generally operate under the shaky assumption that our out-of-awareness assumptions are correct. To illustrate just how self-unaware we can be, would you please stop for a moment, right now, and say a sentence out loud? Any sentence. Just pick one out of the blue sky....

Here's what that little task means to you. When you decided to speak that sentence, you did not consciously decide to engineer the sentence-building process by selecting a subject, a verb and an object. You didn't consciously select vocabulary to fill the in blanks of the sentence architecture. You didn't consciously decide to use a transitive or intransitive verb.

But your automatic brain processes did *exactly* that kind of engineering to construct your thought. Such automatic aspects of decision-making processes are the roots of executive effectiveness. Automatic processes operate beneath the surface of the four factors. The issue is not about what people say, it is a matter of how they say it in terms of the underlying automatic processing that counts. Automatic processes are as obscure to most of us as knowing how your stomach enzymes are converting your lunch to energy.

The four factors of executive decision-making operate at that invisible cognitive level of decision-making. That is why it is so difficult to monitor one's own decision making process—because most of it is beyond one's grasp. Trying to do so resembles the impossibility of lifting yourself up by your own bootstraps.

Self-Awareness – or Not

Without effective and objective feedback, executive decision-making will not be optimally adaptive to the complex and changing situations that arise in today's business world. The truly exceptional executive has a knack for objective self-observation and self-induced decision making tune-ups. Less than 5 percent of the executive population has this knack for enhancing their own decision making process. It is a rare skill to be able to mirror and measure one's self and one's habits objectively. The rest of us need a modest bit of help.

When the results of executive decision-making are less than satisfying, something within these four factors is *always* the cause, and the cause is *always* out of sight. If the cause were within the executive's grasp, he or she would get it fixed as quickly as one fixes a flat tire on a car. Individuals will *never* be aware of these flaws in their rationales if left to their own self-help insights. Even worse, without a clear self-understanding of these automatic decision-making processes, an executive will repeat habitual mistakes time after time in spite of intentions to the contrary. Fortunately, habits emerge from the four factors and can be managed *in terms of* the four factors. As a rule, the solution to a limiting perspective is an individually specific form of linguistic *reframing*, or repackaging the out-of-awareness assumptions, habits and preferences that are holding the limiting perspectives in place.

Decision-making limitations show themselves as performance shortfalls. Performance results or key relationships usually suffer. If results or relationships aren't 100% in terms of one's own standards or the boss's standards, then there will be a performance shortfall. The shortfall then acts like grease on a doorknob. Career doors don't open. As coaches and consultants, we routinely see this kind of problem. There are numerous ways to remedy such situations.

Executives need to know how these four factors work to get the most from themselves. Even minor performance improvements can act like compound interest over time by leveraging modest changes into cumulatively powerful effects. Consider an athlete running a four-minute mile with a pebble in his or her shoe. It is not a big issue, but it cripples the entire performance.

Changing a Point of View

A seemingly minor change in an executive's perspective may have dramatic positive effects on the executive's personal and organizational bottom line. Consider that coaching a pro baseball player to subtly shift the grip on the bat can dramatically raise the results on a personal scorecard. The crucial performance and decision-making issues at stake depend on offering *the right kind of feedback* about the right kind of issue.

Another key notion to include in self assessment is other people. How much psychology or behavior is part of the executive rationale? The simple fact is that the more important one's role becomes, the more people are part of the equation. Feedback about how people are reacting to an individual's actions is crucial. All jobs occur in the context of others. How someone comes across is the most important item.

With most executives, regardless of their age or experience, the leveraged effect of effective feedback accelerates a career with the kind of impact usually associated with an Ivy League MBA. The positive results achieved in job and career feedback occur in terms of accelerated careers and enhanced performance. Results become immediately obvious.

These hidden problems within the Four Factors Model™ always take place out of sight of one's objective awareness – or else they would be obvious and easy to change. The problem issues can be characterized as personal hidden agendas, habits of thinking or blind spots that the individual doesn't recognize. Remember, no one can see his or her own eyes without a mirror.

In many cases the causes are unexamined beliefs and assumptions. The invisible beliefs and assumptions express themselves as things about one's self that an executive "takes for granted." That means that feedback doesn't work unless it is *specific* and *reciprocal* to the individual's unique hidden assumptions – or blind spots.

As illustrated earlier, everyone takes for granted "automatic sentence engineering." Automatic processes are not in the individual's direct control, no matter how powerful or well positioned anyone may be within an organization. These aspects of human nature are inherent in human nature whether we choose to recognize them or not.

The Way It Is – Or Seems To Be

If you take something for granted, you are not aware of that particular something—you are blind to it. Period. This fact is as common in the executive suite as pin stripe suits. We are not talking here about content-based skills such as financial know how or knowing a foreign language or reading, writing and arithmetic. We are talking about the sub-conscious, automatic processing features of executive thinking. That executive thinking produces performance, whether of the sub-optimum or the optimum kind. Such automatic-level blind spots work to prevent feedback from allowing people to perceive and adjust to changes in their situations.

Here is a horrible example of a situation, a real one, where an executive got all four factors wrong. This kind of scenario plays out in the corporate world with surprising frequency.

Harry talks with his boss, only to learn that he has been given a very disappointing raise compared to his expectations. He returns to his office, fuming. He feels he has been gyped since he views his own work as the best compared to his team of co-workers. Eventually he decides to set things right. He returns to his boss's office, they have a loud argument and Harry is nearly fired - plus he lost the argument.

Harry felt justified. Everyone feels justified for what they do. But how many of us really are justified from an objective point of view? When coaching, we see these kinds of executive problems every day. Here are the root causes of what Harry got wrong in terms of the Four Factors:

The situation: Harry misread the situation. He unknowingly framed the situation as win-lose instead of win-win. Harry made the out-of-awareness mistake of viewing himself as an invaluable yet wronged employee. Instead, he needed to see himself as a supplier of services to a customer, his boss. The customer is always right, whether the individual is a consultant or an employee. Harry acted on his own opinion of himself and ignored clear feedback to the contrary from his boss, i.e., that the customer was not happy with the supplier. No supplier of services can survive long that way.

The role: Harry believed in his subjective version of his role. In today's market, there is only one major difference between an employee and an external consultant. If the customer is not satisfied, it merely takes longer to fire an employee than it takes to fire a consultant. His boss hired him to solve problems, but instead Harry created two problems. First, he disappointed his boss and therefore got a below-par raise—while having no clear awareness of his shortcomings. And, second, he created another problem by angering his boss. In spite of his ego, Harry was not indispensable. He needed to play his role with the same tact an external consultant would use.

The goal: Harry had the wrong goal, given his situation. His goal was tactical and self-serving. He actually believed that he could argue successfully instead of engaging some diplomacy and common courtesy. His goal was not an ecological goal; in other words, his goal was not to find out what his shortcomings were in the boss's terms and learn how to correct them. Harry gave priority to his own goals out of context of his boss's evaluation. Instead, he thought he should get what he felt he deserved. In contrast, he could have tactfully learned his boss's point of view and found out how to support his boss's goals for a win-win outcome.

The wrong option: Harry chose the wrong option. He chose anger and argument over diplomacy and persuasion. Winning such an argument is impossible. He did not anticipate the consequences of an argument. He might have assumed an attitude of "curious not furious" about the causes of his boss's point of view. Then he might

have thought it through and taken a persuasive approach. Also, he badly chose the wrong option of an immediate tactical and emotional reaction rather than a cooler, more strategic and ecological approach. Harry gave in to his anger rather than taking a diplomatic route. Righteous indignation is a poor substitute to finding a workable solution where both sides can win.

In this example, Harry got everything wrong. He *took for granted* his beliefs about “the way it is” in all four factors. He suffered a set back because of the blind spots. Few executives make as bad a hash of things as Harry did. Yet even a single one of these four types of blind spots will produce negative fallout. The Harry’s of the world are guilty of a lot of wishful thinking.

Wishful thinking, based on deeply seated, taken-for-granted beliefs, stalls the efforts of many executives. In most situations, executives tend to do better than Harry. But all of his mistakes had one common denominator: all of his mistakes were based on automatically operating ideas, blind spots he “took for granted.” We all take things for granted to some degree. The downside occurs when those issues invisibly put a brake on effective thinking, decision making, performance and career progress.

Systematic Flaws

Even if an executive is only mistaken about one of these four factors in any given situation, performance will be unnecessarily limited, and many decisions at work will go badly. Other than in cases of lack of know-how, virtually all executive problems will boil down to one or more of the items in the Four Factor Model™ of executive thinking, decision making and career progress.

It is very difficult for an individual to perceive subjective limitations objectively. Like an iceberg, thought processes that are taken for granted are below the surface. This kind of invisible issue will not surface in an ordinary conversation. That is why a Jack Welch or a Warren Buffet is so rare. Exceptional executives have a way of reassessing the things they take for granted – especially the things they take for granted about themselves. That ability to reassess one’s self objectively is what makes them special.

If you probe into the success of exceptional executives, you will consistently find they are the objective masters of these four factors. Some may use friends or use a coach as a source of feedback to adapt their thinking. Some may analyze their own decision processes carefully for flaws. Of course, once in a very rare while, someone gets it right by pure luck. In any case, they probe their own assumptions within their thinking and enhance their decision-making.

They do not, *unknowingly*, get in their own way. It is as simple as that – no exceptions. We know this from having successfully coached and consulted to countless executives in the Fortune 500 companies. Then those observations were tested by the most rigorous scientific methods for validity. When the invisible belief is corrected, careers leap forward and individual decision-making takes on a new degree of power and effectiveness.

Feedback and Symptoms

The downside of “taking things for granted” about one’s self can severely limit one’s overlooked decision flaws. The individual will likely never know why he or she is not doing as well as expected. Any one or any combination of the four factors, when misperceived, can cause serious trouble for the individual who is caught unaware. Popular 360-degree peer evaluations and performance ratings can define what is wrong, and provide useful feedback. But those peer evaluations are about the superficial content of behavior. Those evaluations can *not* get at the invisible reasons behind the limiting issues.

Peer evaluation cannot diagnose the cause at the automatic level of decision processing. That is why so many performance and feedback programs seem so frustrating. They are working at a superficial level of the *content* of what is being said. The power is found in the implicit assumptions, not the obvious “tip of the iceberg” above the water line.

Off-the-shelf performance improvement methods are like treating a medical patient to remove their problematic symptoms without knowing the real causes. Executives coached with up-to-date linguistic methods have always made a rapid change for the better because the feedback effort quickly targets the real issues like a laser. Conversational techniques for renewing and reinvigorating those automatic decision-functions have been well-established for a generation or more.

Finding the sub-surface issues does usually require outside help. The more qualified the help, the better. Fixing the issues among the four factors does not resemble personal heavy lifting for the executive. Metaphorically, suppose you trusted a moving company to transport and organize your furniture in your new house. You would expect to find the furniture placed according to the plan you gave them. But if you arrive and find all of the living room furniture stacked in the kitchen, you can’t use either room. With that configuration, you are stuck. Still, there is nothing inherently wrong with the furniture, nor with the kitchen.

Executives have blind spots about hidden assets that simply need to be made available to them for use on the job. The Sommer Survey™ is a tool that accomplishes this metaphoric reorganization of inherent personal assets. Cognitive and motivational furniture are much easier to move than an actual room full of furniture.

That is, if you simply reorganize assets you already have, everything then works the way you want. Highly leveraged executive feedback among the four factors is more like reorganizing internal furniture than it is about creating whole new repertoires of performance. Most executive concerns, though sometimes subtle and hard to detect, have straightforward solutions.

Disappointments

Some of symptoms related to the Four Factor Model™ are these:

- Does the individual feel limited or frustrated?

- Is the individual's career progress measured in minor gains?
- Does the individual have doubts about his or her performance and potential?
- Does the individual dislike the feedback received about performance?
- Are the criticisms or 'politics' of other people a problem?
- Does conflict limit an otherwise effective individual?
- Are things going the individual's way less often than anticipated?
- Does the individual feel happy or feel pride about the work most of the time?
- Is the individual moving forward, or treading water?
- Is the individual growing in interpersonal relationships?
- Does obtaining cooperation become a struggle for the person?
- Does the person express feelings about being unfairly treated?

When anyone takes something for granted, there is no clue, no mental red flag, to signal the actual cause of the related difficulty. Like an iceberg, most reasons for individual limitations are hidden. People's beliefs within the framework of the Four Factor Model™ will be uniquely their own. That means that a prefabricated "program" solution will not work. Programs are standardized approaches and don't work well for unique personal perspectives. The most effective solutions are unique to the person. When uniqueness can be built into a solution, good results are the usual outcome. The individual's drives and motives, when profiled effectively, show the answers to a better situation.

Powerful Leverage

The four factors act like a mirror to help us see our blind spots. Readers: Please test your own rationale. Just ask yourself about the four factors in your own terms to find your personal points of leverage:

1. Do you objectively know exactly the career and job situation you are in without illusions?
2. Do you know the role you have and how to play it very effectively in the organization's context?
3. Do you have clear and ambitious goals that are ecological for you and the organization?
4. Do you create effective and ecological choices for yourself and others?

Do you get unequivocal, useful feedback? Do you meet your own expectations, and the expectations of key people in a position to judge you? Then you are doing fine. Otherwise, do you or any other person subject to your decision making *really* know why expectations are not being satisfied?

When these implicit four factors aren't going as hoped, that is reason enough to identify whatever issues are below the surface of awareness. Some knowledgeable help will point out how to solve them – quickly. No one should take the future for granted. Everyone will have to live in that future. Make sure it is the 'designer future' of personal choice, not mere luck.
